

*Elizabeth Weber*

## Dreaming of Bill: September 5, 1994

It's your birthday and the field across the street  
swarms with monarchs  
drawn by flowering golden rod.  
As children, we stunned them with baseball bats  
and carried them back home  
to fill our living room  
with the fury of their wings  
as they fluttered back to life.  
There were always a few  
that didn't make it.  
We never thought of their pain.

In my dreams, you're always twenty,  
skin smooth, your face  
blank as that lake with no wind.  
Even your shirts are twenty years old,  
button down collars and pin stripes,  
the same old white jeans and penny loafers.

Today, rain fell, a slow drizzle.  
My breath catching  
on the drops that fell before me  
I ran out into it and on the path  
stumbled across a box turtle.  
A pattern of yellow and black diamonds,  
it drew itself back  
into its shell and hissed at me.  
It was the most beautiful thing

I'd seen that day, and I wanted it  
 off that path and under ferns  
 where no sniffing dogs could find it.

That last time you came home  
 unexpected and on leave from the Army,  
 you stood by the big picture window  
 not a ghost but a near ghost,  
 playing the bass guitar and trying  
 to look brave and not as if you were  
 on your way to war in a week.  
 That was another fall,  
 another falling of leaves  
 turning the world red, burning the world.  
 I always thought of you as the flunk-out king  
 with the "Live for today  
 for tomorrow you die" motto.  
 The boy I caught missing his biology final  
 to attend a rock concert.  
 Not the hero you later became,  
 the one, who shot twice and dying,  
 kept radioing for help.

Each morning this fall I read about men and women  
 ripped apart, their bodies shredded  
 like the water balloons  
 we tossed at each other in fun.  
 I read about children killed  
 for reasons not understood,  
 men who fight for a mark where the land ends,  
 for the right to tell who to do what.  
 Serbs impregnating Croat women  
 so they will be cast out by their families in shame.

What was it like in that country  
 you went to  
 where people looked at you  
 with eyes like those of that dog we once found,  
 its bloody neck caught in a wire snare?

It snapped at anything that got close.  
Perhaps that's what you became.

These days a Vietnamese family lives  
down the alley. They grow cabbages  
and zucchini in a large field out on Mullen Road.  
I see the oldest daughter walking  
the irrigation ditches and carrying buckets of water.  
Yesterday in the grocery store, her mother squatted  
on the floor in front of me in the check-out line  
and dug in her purse for money.  
The cashier looked at her as if she were a cockroach  
just crawled out from beneath the spinach.  
I had to close my eyes.  
All I could see were the villages you wrote about,  
how you went through pulling out old men,  
women and children from the places they hid  
and burned their huts.  
All I could see were their dead bodies  
sprawled in a ditch and in a road beside a rice paddy.  
That moment I was glad you were dead.  
I wanted to lift the woman from the floor.  
I wanted to throw her down.  
I wanted to rip her money from her still living hand  
and scatter it like so many lost seeds.

**Elizabeth Weber** teaches Creative Writing at the University of Indianapolis. Her poetry has appeared in many journals.